

# **New York: A City With an Attitude . . . and a Heart**



Written by  
Congressman Pete Hoekstra

On Wednesday, September 19, 2001, Congressman Pete Hoekstra visited New York City and the site of the former World Trade Center twin towers with members of the Subcommittee on Terrorism and Homeland Security of the House Select Committee on Intelligence. Here are his thoughts and photographs.

As we move through these times – times and circumstances that are unfamiliar territory to all of us – it is important that we talk to each other, listen to each other and move forward together, hand in hand. It's why I am spending so much time communicating with you. We need to share the stories and the information surrounding these attacks so that we can move forward. While this diary is about New York, the same story can be written about the tragedy, suffering and response at the Pentagon and the flight in Pennsylvania. Each is a story of heartbreak and triumph. Let's make sure that they are all told.

*Peter Hoekstra*

**Introduction:** To me, New York has always been a city with an attitude, an attitude that I didn't always feel comfortable with. Today I would experience a different New York. It still had an attitude, but it was an attitude that inspired me and made me proud. Their spirit resonated a quiet strength and confidence. New York showed its emotion; it embraced America as America embraced it. All of America can be proud of New York, and New Yorkers, because of its brave response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

**Wednesday, 6:15 a.m.: Washington, D.C. Leave the Rayburn House Office Building and travel to Union Station.**

Early Tuesday afternoon I was notified that the Subcommittee on Terrorism and Homeland Security had scheduled a trip to New York City for Wednesday. I made the decision that I needed to participate in the trip and, therefore, canceled my scheduled Wednesday events. At the time I received the call, I was participating in the Habitat for Humanity Community Leaders Build. I was disappointed that I had to leave the Habitat project because there wasn't anything I would rather be doing than building a home in West Michigan at the same time that we as a nation faced the task of rebuilding our national "home."

It's interesting that while my passion in Washington during the last eight years has been my work on education and budget issues, the most important work I may ever do in Washington may center around my work on the Intelligence Committee this year.

Seven out of eight members on the subcommittee made last minute arrangements to make the trip back to Washington to participate in this trip – an excellent response that shows the seriousness with which the subcommittee views its work.

The flights from G.R. to D.C. go off without a hitch, on time, no hassle!

**7:00-10:00 a.m.: Train trip to New York.** It seems odd to be riding on one of America's newest trains to a destination that has fallen victim to the greatest terrorist attack on America. I read the latest news clips. One report lists more than 5000 missing, including 400 from the Netherlands. I hope I'm prepared for this. The sunrise is beautiful. This day will see some sharp contrasts.



**10:00-10:30 a.m.: Travel to FBI Antiterrorism Headquarters.** Yes, this is New York but it is different. Security is everywhere. There are troops in military fatigues with guns that mean business. Things are different.

**10:30-11:30 a.m.: Briefing at Antiterrorism Headquarters.**

The Antiterrorism Task Force has been forced to relocate because of the disruption of phone service at its normal site. They adjusted rapidly and now have a fully functioning site that houses a multi-agency response team. This is the first of many examples we will see today of workers getting their jobs done because of their commitment, creativity and heroic efforts. They're working as a team. Yes!

The briefing helps put the World Trade Center attacks in perspective. These attacks are a continuation of the gutless attacks on America over the last ten years. Previous attacks include:

- World Trade Center Garage: February 26, 1993, six Americans killed, 1000 injured;
- Al Khobar Towers: June 25, 1996, 19 American airmen killed, 500 injured;
- Attacks on U.S. Embassies in Africa: August 7, 1998, 12 Americans killed, 200 others killed, 5,000 injured;
- Attack on the USS Cole: October 12, 2000, 17 American sailors killed, 38 injured; and
- Attack on WTC and Pentagon: September 11, 2001, 607 confirmed dead, 2,326 injured, at least 5,422 missing.

These terrorists have been at war with America for more than ten years. Did we, as the American people, realize it?

The Antiterrorism Task Force has been involved in all these investigations. They are good at what they do. While they are heartbroken they couldn't stop this attack, they also know that as a subcommittee, we are aware of the numerous attacks they have prevented. Those details just can't be made public to prevent terrorist from figuring out how we stopped them. Our Subcommittee leaders, Chairman Chambliss from Georgia and Ranking member Harman from California expressed their appreciation to the workers for their efforts. Chambliss said, "Catch those sorry \_\_\_\_\_ that did this!" And I couldn't agree more. These terrorists have done it before and will do it again if we do not stop them. They have viciously attacked military personnel, government employees, and now, men, women and children. Where will they stop?

I talked with some of the rescue workers. It was great to share with them the stories of support from West Michigan that I experienced over the last few days. I told them about the service in Muskegon Monday night with all the rescue workers. They were visibly touched.

I told them how inspiring the tapes were that showed the escalators in the WTC. The down escalators were packed but so were the up escalators. The up escalators were packed with rescue workers. Most never made it back out. The workers said it best, "You know something's wrong when you're going north and everyone else is going south!"

As we leave we see the huge posters made by kids expressing thanks to the rescue workers for what they have done. Amen!

**11:45 a.m.-12:15 p.m.: Boat ride down the Hudson River to WTC site.** The police boat pulls out, out in front in the distance is the Statue of Liberty. Yes! I take a picture of a U.S. flag in the foreground and the Empire State Building in the background. I hope it turns out.

The first indication of "Ground Zero" (the WTC site) is the smoke. It's still smoking. Many of the beams are still red hot as they are uncovered, and start new fires as the oxygen reaches them. Then you smell it. It smells like an electrical fire. Then you see some of the damaged buildings surrounding "Ground Zero" but you can't see the site itself. I ask a policewoman on the boat how tall the WTC towers were in comparison to the buildings remaining. She's not quite sure but says a youngster told her it was like New York lost its front teeth when the buildings collapsed. They were the focal point of the skyline, and now they are gone.



As we pull into the slip you sense the magnitude of the disaster. Boats at anchor look OK until you look close and see that they are covered with a thick layer of debris. They're all gray. We are met at the dock. The mayor's assistant indicates we will take an indirect route to "Ground Zero" to ease our way in, in case some become uneasy. If we have a problem we are to let someone know and they'll help us.

Firemen, rescue workers, soldiers, electrical workers, truckers, construction workers. It's organized chaos. I've never seen anything like it. This is only the beginning. These folks smile or give us a thumbs up as we say thanks and shake their hands. They're working hard on what they still consider a rescue effort. They may never give up hope until the last piece of debris is moved because it's their friends and co-workers who they are looking for. These workers are awesome!

As we walk down the street between all the equipment, the destruction comes into focus. The buildings on each side have

suffered extensive damage. In front of us is Tower 7, the shortest of the buildings to collapse. As we reach the corner we see “Ground Zero” to our right. Unbelievable. Total destruction. A pile of rubble, but now, solemnly, a grave for 5000 people. This is hard. America is bruised. It’s a deep bruise and it hurts. I’m not sure if I hurt, or if I am just overwhelmed by what I see. Even though I’m at “Ground Zero,” I still can’t quite comprehend it all.

The workers are inspiring. We’re notified that while we were there they recovered the body of an officer, one of their brothers. They will assemble an escort team to carry the body out of the rubble. These folks must really be hurting, but they keep on going. This has now gone on for eight days and will continue for many more. May God bless them, their families, and the victims and their families. We also talk to some folks who witnessed the tragic events. Their lives will also be forever changed by what they experienced. They didn’t see pictures. Etched in their minds will be the scenes of individuals jumping, suffering and dying.



There is no acceptable excuse for terrorism. Think about it:

- A pattern of planned terrorist attacks spanning ten years;
- 5000 innocent men, women and children murdered;
- The horrible deaths that many of these people suffered; and
- The pain and anguish for thousands - no - millions of families who watched the events last week all across America.

These are evil people. They have struck viciously over a period of time and will do so again regardless of what we do. We, as Americans, need to realize this fact as we plan how to minimize the risk of this ever happening again.

As we leave “Ground Zero,” as a group, we realize that we have never seen anything like this before, and hope that we never see anything like it again.

**12:45 p.m.: Return boat trip, briefing and ride through New York.** The mayor’s assistant shares some additional information with us. In these attacks New York and America lost some of its best and brightest. New York’s finest were called to this scene, and they responded. They went into the buildings. They set up their command center in the buildings. They never expected the buildings to collapse. The buildings did and, with that collapse, New York lost the lives of some of the best rescue workers in the world. It required lower officers to step up and fill the breach. They did so admirably. Now they need our support to again be the best in the world. It will take time.

As we drive through New York some things start looking the same. People are in line to buy tickets to “Lion King.” The sidewalks are busy. Then you see a prayer booth standing proudly on the sidewalk. Kiosks standing and announcing that “United We Stand.” Yes, some things are different, but much is the same. We are a strong and proud nation whose motto is “In God We Trust.” Our spirit, our faith, our character and our trust in God are things no one can ever take from us.

**Late Afternoon: Train ride back to D.C.** I talked with a reporter who wanted to know how I was dealing with this. I now know. I felt better by writing about it. During the last few days I saw the spirit of America alive in the individuals, families, communities and churches of West Michigan. Today I took that message to New York. Today I also can report to the people of West Michigan that the spirit of America is alive and bright in New York! On the ride back to Washington, I saw the sunset. It was a great sunset.

**Summary:** Mayor Giuliani symbolizes the courage and strength of his town and this nation. He has demonstrated that you can be strong, yet compassionate. He has demonstrated, as have all the workers and families of New York and the Pentagon that they are strong and they have a heart. America is strong and it has a heart. We will exercise justice and show compassion. We will rebuild this place called America, but which we call home. “May God Bless America, my home sweet home!”